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SUBJECT: RELIGION AND POLITICS IN TANZANIA: DEBATE ON OIC MEMBERSHIP
A CHALLENGE TO INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

REF: 2008 DAR ES SALAAM 837

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. During the latter half of 2008, debate simmered between Christian and Muslim Tanzanians regarding membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Foreign Minister Membe sparked the recent round of discussion by indicating that Tanzania would seek membership, a position he subsequently sought to tone down. Christian leaders have been the most vocal in response, with some even calling for Membe's resignation. The issue shows a divide within the ruling CCM party, while the opposition has kept its distance. End Summary.

Background: Zanzibar's brief encounter with the OIC

¶2. (U) The semi-autonomous and almost wholly Muslim archipelago of Zanzibar was admitted to the OIC in 1992. Zanzibar's OIC membership ignited a dispute with the Union (national) government, which compelled Zanzibar to withdraw from the OIC the following year on the grounds that Zanzibar is not a sovereign state and that foreign affairs - including membership and participation in international fora - is a national authority. Some Zanzibaris, especially the more nationalistic, remain resentful, because they maintain that Zanzibar is in fact a nation, in free association with mainland "Tanganyika."

Controversy resumes

¶3. (U) In August, FM Membe's assertion that "no harm" would arise from Tanzania's joining the OIC set off a torrent of discussion. Christian leaders responded strongly, some opposing even consideration of the idea and calling for Membe's resignation (Note: Membe himself is Christian). The Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT), which brings together all of Tanzania's Protestant denominations, released a statement asserting that "discussion of whether or not the country should join the religious organization [OIC] could pose a threat to peace and national stability."

¶4. (SBU) Rev. Leonard Mtaita, the CCT's General Secretary, told Emboff the CCT opposes OIC membership "especially because of the behavior of some Muslims in Tanzania and in the world at large. They are not only thinking of peaceful co-existence but also to defend their faith, which may sometimes mean intolerance. Mtaita, one of 25 commissioners of Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa, organized a CCT-hosted meeting of church leaders in Bagamoyo in December. Catholic and Pentacostal leaders were invited to attend, but CCT decided against its original plan of inviting Muslim

Sheikhs, according to Mtaita "because the air still seems too tense."

¶5. (U) Christian leaders and other opponents also justified their position on constitutional grounds. The CCT cited section 19(2) of the Tanzanian constitution as drawing a clear line between state and religion. Levina Kato of Tanzania's Legal and Human Rights Center echoed the constitutional argument, as did Dr. Sengondo Mvungi, Senior Lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam, who noted that "religious affairs are outside the jurisdiction of the government."

¶6. (U) In a Rai (Swahili weekly political paper, circulation 80,000) commentary entitled "Let's Not Cheat Ourselves, OIC has a Secret Agenda," the author opined that "the founding charter of the organization states clearly that the Conference shall be subject to and be governed by Islamic values and traditions."

It's Not About Religion?

¶7. (U) Supporters of OIC membership have tended to play down any religious elements. Hamza Hassan Juma, Minister of State in the Chief Minister's office of the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, told a press conference that "Zanzibar supports the Union government in joining the OIC because the issue is not religion. It is about the economy and development of the people." Most mainstream Zanzibaris believe that OIC membership will be an avenue to increased development assistance.

¶8. (SBU) Juma was among several supporters to point out that some OIC members are secular and had joined without regard for the size of their Muslim communities. An Arab ambassador cited to Poloff the example of Uganda as a secular OIC member. He also asserted that OIC membership could result in Tanzania receiving valuable economic

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support. He added that joining the OIC would "quiet some Muslims" on Zanzibar with minimal investment of resources or significant concessions on the part of the Union government.

¶9. (U) Tanzania's National Muslim Council, BAKWATA, has sought to project a neutral stance. While criticizing the CCT for its opposition, BAKWATA committed to following the GOT's decision on whether to join the OIC.

Containing the debate

¶10. (U) Since Membe's initial remarks on the OIC, the Foreign Ministry has sought to downplay the issue. Deputy MF Seif Iddi said in an interview that "Tanzania will not be guided by Islamic laws, because the OIC, just like any other development organization, has nothing to do with Islamic laws." Membe himself said publicly in October that the GOT would "seek the people's consent" before deciding whether Tanzania should join the OIC.

¶11. (SBU) The ruling CCM party, whose membership includes both Christians and Muslims, is divided on the OIC issue. One CCM insider told us that Membe's remarks on the OIC had been a surprise for all of CCM. A Christian MP from the mainland told Poloff that it had been a bad idea for Membe to raise, adding that Parliament was a poor venue for discussing the issue. Publicly, the CCM Vice Chair has tried to distance the party from the debate.

¶12. (SBU) The opposition has so far been content to leave the debate to CCM. A senior CUF official told us that parliamentary debate based on religious sentiment was new for Tanzania and a troubling sign. CUF supports Tanzanian membership in the OIC, but it is not a key party platform. Except in Zanzibar, CUF has largely kept quiet during the debate.

¶13. (SBU) Comment: Public discussion of the OIC issue has begun to fade for now. However, taken with the kadhi court issue (reftel), the debate over OIC membership has exposed fault lines both within CCM and in Tanzanian society as a whole. Tanzanians are proud of their history of tolerance, but many Tanzanians are also fervent

believers in their differing faiths. These debates underscore the risks, especially to a broad-based party such as CCM, of tackling issues bound to offend substantial parts of the populace. CUF's relative quiet on this issue may stem from CUF's efforts to shake its image as a party for Muslims.

ANDRE